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## Rao Aluri, Founder and President, Parkway Publishers

Katina Strauch

*Against the Grain*

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# Interview with Rao Aluri

Founder and President, Parkway Publishers <aluri@netins.net> <<http://netins.net/showcase/aluri>>

by Katina Strauch (Editor, *Against the Grain*)

*I first met Rao Aluri — he tells me that his name is very common in some parts of India and I felt an instant affinity to him because, you see, my name is a very common name in Greece — anyway, I first met Rao Aluri through Eleanor Cook who brought Rao and his lovely wife, Mary Reichel, University Librarian, Appalachian State University Library, to the 16th Charleston Conference. I enjoyed meeting him and I thought you would too. Read on and see. — KS*

**ATG:** So — you are a publisher. Tell us all about it. How did you come to start a publishing company? Where did you get the name?

**RA:** I was always fascinated with the idea of publishing. I co-wrote two books for Libraries Unlimited and was always interested in the process. When we moved to Boone because of Mary's job, we decided this was the time to try out something I had always wanted to try because we doubted that we could get two library jobs in such a small place.

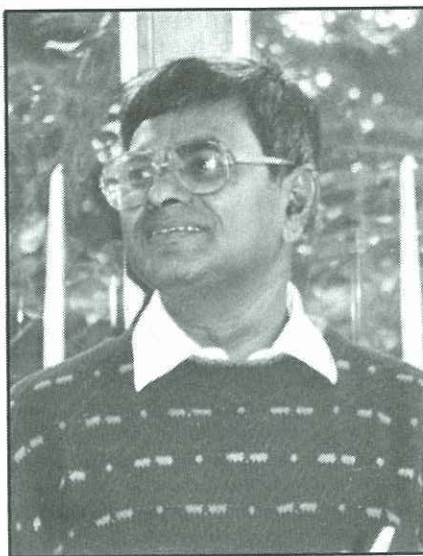
My wife Mary and I started the company in 1992 and published the first book in 1993. We decided to call it Parkway because Mary and I came to this area because of the Blue Ridge Parkway. Mary wanted a logo using the stone bridges on the Blue Ridge Parkway so we took photos of a number of those bridges. We scanned them into the computer and got the logo from that.

**ATG:** What kind of books do you publish? How many a year? Do you publish any journals?

**RA:** So far, I've just published 13 books. No journals. One of the books I published is distributed on discs as well. It's called *Bio-systematic Monograph of the Genus Cucumis: A Botanical Identification of Cucumbers and Melons*. I'm especially pleased because one of the reviews was very complimentary that the book also came with a diskette. The book was reviewed in the *ASPT Newsletter* (American Society for Plant Taxonomists) and they said that from now on books like this should be issued in dual form — both print and electronic. It was nice to set the trend.

**ATG:** Are you a botanist by training?

**RA:** No. My background is in physics. Then I moved to library science. A lot of the



areas I publish in I don't have direct training in.

**ATG:** How do you know what to publish? Do you turn down a lot of manuscripts?

**RA:** I try to find someone to review the manuscript who is knowledgeable. Based on the comments of experts, I make the decision whether to accept a manuscript or not. I turn down a number of manuscripts and many times it's because there is not enough market to justify the publication. Also some manuscripts are too controversial. I accept about 50% and turn down about 50%.

It is hardest to market in the areas of social sciences and humanities. I have had more luck in marketing scientific monographs, getting reviewed, etc. I'm not sure why that is, but it is fascinating to see the differences between the disciplines in the marketing area.

**ATG:** What areas have you published in then? Only the sciences?

**RA:** I just printed the catalog. We have 3 in biology, 4 in various aspects of history, 5 in social sciences and education, and 1 book of poetry. Most of these are for the college and university library market.

I just publish non-fiction. I published one book of poetry because Mary and I have a friend who is 80 years old. She had four small books and wanted to reprint them. She asked me to help her negotiate the best deal. I was astonished at how expensive it was, so I decided to help her out and publish the

book myself. It's called the *Ransom Street Quartet*. She was recently very excited when an English professor at Catawba College asked her to come and read some of the poems to her classes. That generated a lot of letters to me from people who have similar collections of poetry that they want to get published. My standard line is, "no, I don't want to get into that; it's too subjective to judge."

**ATG:** How do you handle distribution? How about discounts to distributors? How about book returns?

**RA:** Distribution is quite difficult, more so than I had expected. One approach is that I rent mailing lists from different companies depending on the book. I try to reach libraries and faculty in the areas of the books that I publish. The companies send lists on peel off mailing labels. So far that's my primary approach. But, on a regular basis, I do get orders from Baker & Taylor. Surprisingly, that's the place I get most of my orders. It's a nice, consistent pattern.

**ATG:** Do you give B&T a discount?

**RA:** I give all of the booksellers and book distributors a discount, but I'm not sure how much difference it makes because they are usually single orders. They don't stock my titles. I would like to get them to do that, but they haven't yet.

One thing I learned from jobbers like B&T is that barcodes are very important. This is also important to bookstores. If I don't have a barcode in a book, B&T charges me 12 cents a book to insert one. That's when I hired a cover designer, someone experienced in the area to design the cover and where the barcode went. I use Sabre Printers in Johnson City, Tennessee.

**ATG:** How do distributors learn about your books? Are they handled on approval plans?

**RA:** I don't send the book. I send a catalog only. I know from my dealings with jobbers that they don't want the book, they want the catalog. Usually they look at my catalog and enter the information into their databases. That's the best way to deal with them.

I am still struggling with getting my books handled on an approval plan. Recently, though, in the past two months, Yankee Book Peddler has put me on their approval plan. I

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think they are doing cards rather than books. I don't know if this is going to affect my sales. I guess it is too soon to tell.

**ATG:** *How many copies do you print? Do you print only in paperback? Have you changed because of library practices? And do you usually sell all the copies that you print?*

**RA:** Usually I print about 500 copies in paperback. I find that is ideal. For one book I printed 3000 copies, for another I printed 250 copies. Yes, usually I sell all that I print, eventually. One book — *Living With Autism: The Parent Histories* — got excellent reviews in newsletters and then I got a lot of steady orders from parents. Quite a bit of that book selling is word of mouth. That's not the big seller, but it is my steady seller. My big seller is about the Cone Mansion. Moses Cone was a textile magnate in Greensboro, N.C. and this is the history of Moses Cone and his wife. They are a prominent family in Greensboro. The book attracted local attention, had a lot of local history interest. It's in Greensboro and the Blue Ridge Parkway Bookstores. They picked it up right away.

**ATG:** *You have to use your resourcesfulness and wits. What is the bookstore market like? It seems a mystery to me.*

**RA:** Yes, it is somewhat easier with the academic market than with the bookstore market which is virtually impossible. But, not surprisingly, most of my books are not suitable for bookstores. I was able to place *A Mansion in the Mountains* (the Cone book I was talking about above) in all the bookstores in Boone except for Walden's. There was no way I could get through to them. So I gave up. The buyers are in Ann Arbor. I sent them copies, but I never heard from them. It's hard to reach those distributors. I thought I would be able to get a distributor to handle *Living With Autism*, but I was unsuccessful. For a small publisher, it's kind of tough.

With the Moses Cone book, B. Dalton/Barnes & Noble bought a modest number of copies (20 or so), but I found a small bookstore in Greensboro sold more copies than Barnes & Noble. It's fascinating. I take a book into a local pharmacy and give them 5-10 copies and they pay me right away. B. Dalton needs 120 days to pay. Something is wrong. But I was lucky with the Cone book. The Blue Ridge Parkway bookstores and the Cone Mansion all have copies. The person who wrote the book is an employee of the National Park Service and wrote the book as a master's thesis at ASU. I was pleased to be able to publish it and I'm pleased with how it turned out.

**ATG:** *So you do all the indexing and layout and graphics?*

**RA:** Yes but I ask the author to give me advice on how and what to index. Usually we take a color pencil and highlight what needs to be indexed.

I hire a freelance typesetter who I have worked with for a long time.

I have recently begun working with a cover designer. One of the printers I used was at the Charleston Conference — **Braun-Bremfield**. I am very pleased with the process. I like to stick with the people I know. Every time I work with someone new, new problems come up. I guess it's better to do business with known people because they know what I need and they extend credit, etc.

**ATG:** *How long do you take to publish a book?*

**RA:** It depends, but about a year on average. The editing stage takes the most time, but I don't have to work on a strict deadline which is nice. A book is about 2-4 weeks at the typesetter and the printer takes about a month. The best time to release book is very important. I spend a lot more time on the front end editing.

**ATG:** *Describe the editing process.*

**RA:** I use freelance editors. In a university community, there are people who are quite knowledgeable and want a second job at times. My operation is too small to hire a fulltime editor in house so this works out really well. Recently, one of the editors recommended dropping 100 pages of a book. Obviously I was happy because it strengthened the book. Another author wrote, "thank goodness for the editors." There's no way around good editors.

**ATG:** *How important are book reviews to your marketing? How do you get reviews?*

**RA:** So far I have approached it two ways. First, I go through the relevant scholarly journals and send copies of the book to be reviewed to the book review editor. Usually that works, but for example I just got a review of a book that is two years old. That's too long! With a book in the sciences, the reviewing is much quicker. I just had a book come out in March, 1996, and already two reviews have been published. The second thing I do is to send copies for review to the standard library science reviewing sources — *Choice*, *Library Journal*, *Publishers Weekly*. With these sources it's like trying to reach a black box. None of my books have been reviewed in *Choice* and the same with the other library journals. Their procedures and techniques are just not helpful for the very, very small publisher. I have stopped

bothering with them and am relying more on scholarly journals. *Choice* is mostly for undergraduates. There isn't a book review medium appropriate for scholarly books.

When I was writing my business plan (which was half fact and half fiction!), I said that I thought I could sell books based on book reviews, but that has not been the case at least so far. The bulk of sales are practically done before a book is reviewed. So if I can get a good mailing list, I get a lot more sales.

**ATG:** *How do you decide what to charge for your books?*

**RA:** That is the Achilles Heel. I don't know yet. I talked to one fellow publisher and he told me that the maximum price is 15 cents a page as a rule of thumb. I study the PW average pricing tables every year. I am not terribly satisfied with the formula I am using. I have small print runs so I have to price books high enough to recoup expenses, but I want them to reach the general public and be low priced enough for individuals to buy.

**ATG:** *How are you approaching all the electronic hype about publishing? Do you have a homepage? Do you have future plans for any electronic publishing projects?*

**RA:** I do have a homepage <<http://www.netins.net/showcase/alurir>>. And, as I said earlier, I am planning to publish books on disc and in paper. One of my books comes with a disc whether you want it or not. That's about all I am doing so far. At the Conference, I learned that everybody is struggling to figure out what to do in the electronic arena. I guess that getting your money back is the concern for all publishers.

**ATG:** *Did you have trouble talking the author of your book on disc to sign over the rights to publish it on disc?*

**RA:** Not at all. The author is a government employee and he was committed to the distribution of information that way. I have to pay a royalty to the software publisher for every disc we sell, but I had no difficulty convincing the author to offer the book on disc. I have had some people who want to buy the disc separately, but I distribute it with the book. I'm committed to the diskette approach. It's easier to update bibliographies, for example.

**ATG:** *You are a librarian, I believe that you said? What did you do before you became a publisher? And how did you decide to come to the Charleston Conference?*

**RA:** Before moving to Boone, I taught at Emory library school before it was closed.

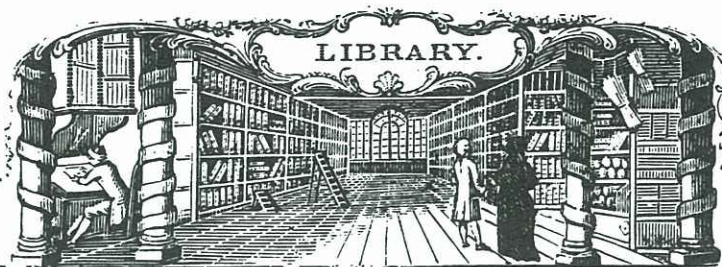
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# Library Profile

## Baker Library, Dartmouth College

Column Editor: **Roger Williams** (Input Culture)  
<73612.242@compuserve.com>



At the peak of fall foliage in New England, we got in touch with **Ann McHugo** at her office in Hanover, New Hampshire, where she is acquisitions services librarian for Baker Library at Dartmouth College.

The Dartmouth College library system predates the American Revolution. Dartmouth, along with a library that existed at the time, was founded in Hanover, New Hampshire, in 1769. The college's first librarian, **Bezaleel Woodward**, maintained its 300-volume collection in his home. A century later at the time of the Civil War, the Dartmouth library included 15,000 volumes, and by 1928, when all the collections moved into Baker Library building, they comprised about a quarter of a million volumes. In 1970, the library became a system of libraries, with total holdings of 2 million volumes and 21 thousand journal subscriptions. Baker Library, the largest of nine in the system, houses the undergraduate social science collection and parts of the humanities collections — separate libraries are dedicated to the disciplines of art and music.

Ann has been head of the acquisitions department at Baker Library for two years. She began working in the Dartmouth libraries as a paraprofessional in 1983, and after taking her professional degree from Simmons College, became director of cataloging. Then in 1994, Ann says, a major reorganization of her division, the Collections Services Division, changed the shape and responsibilities of the departments within it. Until 1994, the division comprised four departments: Cataloging, Acquisitions (monographs), Serials, and Catalog Maintenance. The reorganization of Collections Services merged acquisitions responsibilities for monographs and serials and resulted in the formation of four new departments: Acquisitions (monographs and serials), Pres-

ervation, Bibliographic Control, and Bibliographic Records and Maintenance. Although the reorganization was partly aimed at streamlining library staffing, Ann says it was to some degree prompted by upcoming retirements. "We went from two departments of 14 each to one department of 21," and most of the 7-person staff reduction was managed through attrition. Ann's full-time staff of 21 includes 1 other professional and 2 paraprofessionals. The Acquisitions Department also employs 4 to 6 students.

The Dartmouth Libraries manage the acquisitions process through the Collections Management and Development Program, which is directed by the Collections Management and Development Committee. Purchasing decisions are made not by faculty but, subject to budget considerations, by the libraries' professional staff members, each of whom buys materials for specific subject areas. One of Ann's areas of bibliographic expertise, for instance, is Russian language and literature.

Dartmouth's annual Information Resources budget of \$4 million is distributed about three to one, serials to monographs. Budget lines for acquisitions in the various subject areas are determined by the director of Collections Services. In establishing budget allocations, the director considers the size of the academic department or interdisciplinary program, precedent, inflation, and in consultation with the bibliographers, trends in specific fields. This last consideration takes into account such external realities as skyrocketing prices in the scientific fields and — in one of Ann's areas of acquisition — increases in the costs of materials from Russia.

The acquisitions function is automated through Dartmouth's **Interpac** library management system, which is used in conjunction with a locally developed online catalog.

Interpac was purchased and implemented module by module, with the first installation being the acquisitions module in the latter 1980s. The system has since added the serials control and local processing modules, and for the near future, Ann says, she does not anticipate any need to alter the libraries' present system.

At the same time the Dartmouth libraries are stewards of collections that have been under development for two centuries, they are also responding assertively to the challenges of contemporary and future electronic resources. Ann tells us the Dartmouth libraries have determined to stay on the "cutting edge" of electronic resources. Funds for these resources are drawn from the same subject-area budget lines that support acquisitions in other media, and for resources that will have broad-based applications throughout the Dartmouth community, budgets are created by sharing funds across budget lines.

A very well organized Web site <<http://www.dartmouth.edu/acad-support/library/>> with its immediately accessible homepage is a good example of the libraries' mission with regard to electronic resources, and the Dartmouth system frequently serves as a beta-tester for new electronic products. Ann directed us to the electronic journal project being tested through the Web site — click on the project name, and begin a tour of the possibilities for online journals. The goals of this project are to discover how the Dartmouth community will use the journals and how the journals will control access and serve these "subscribers."

The mix of long tradition with emerging technology, Ann says, typifies the Dartmouth libraries. "It is an extremely old system — with old and rich collections. This is balanced with a commitment to cutting edge technology." 📖

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In Tucson, I was a library manager for Burr-Brown Corporation, which manufactures electronic components. I never worked in libraries in India. I came to Canada to do graduate work in physics and decided to go to library school after I got my masters in physics and didn't want to go on for the PhD. I decided I didn't want to work as a scientist. The job opportunities in Physics weren't that good. So I got my PhD in library science from SUNY Buffalo. My first professional job was as a science reference librarian at University of Nebraska at Omaha. (That's where I met my wife.)

I was pleased to come to the conference and pleased with the AAUP publisher preconference. It's great to meet and talk to people who are having similar problems. For me, my problem is how to get the collection development librarian interested in a new publisher like me.

**ATG:** What do you do in your spare time?

**RA:** I used to have spare time. I used to have more time than money, but, now after four years in publishing, I have neither time nor money!

I do volunteer work for "Meals on Wheels" and I volunteer to prepare taxes for

senior citizens. I've joined the local rotary club. Mary and I have one child, a boy, Krishna, who is nine years old. We've had the joy of being older parents. Krishna is learning more about book publishing and I am hoping to get more and more of his help. I just printed 4000 catalogs and I need help putting labels on catalogs. 📖

**NB:** Hey, y'all, I enjoy ALL of these interviews, I really do. It gives me a chance to meet someone new and talk about common interests. Hasn't this been fun? And next time, I think we should interview **Mary Reichel!** — KS